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ABSTRACT

A study examined the phenomenon of burnout in social service agencies, approaching burnout as a symptom of organizational communication patterns rather than a characteristic inherent in or developed within a particular individual. Sixteen working teams (defined as three or more people in a person-oriented service, who are perceived as a team by their common function within the organization or by their institutional role) participated in the study--eight teams from northern Italy, and eight teams from the northeastern United States. Systemic interviews were conducted, and each team member completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The alternative research method used for this study of social systems integrated two systemic models of interaction--the Milan model, and Pearce and Cronen's communication theory. The content of the interview questions focused on the various relationships and hierarchical levels within the social service organization, and team responses were required. The study analyzed individual episode questionnaires, and then made an intersystemic comparative analysis of the teams in an attempt to recognize connecting patterns of logic. The application of this method shifted the study of social change (via the study of burnout) from an individually oriented focus to a focus on interactive patterns (i.e. what people do together). (Twenty-five references are appended.) (MM)

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The Complexity of Interactive Change:

A Study of Organizational Burnout

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Abstract

The research reported in this paper was designed to examine the phenomenon of burnout in social service agencies. The topic of burnout is approached as a symptom of organizational communication patterns rather than a characteristic inherent in or developed within a particular individual. This different orientation emphasizes intervention (through the research process, itself) into organizational systems which are most often seen as contributing to feelings of burnout. An alternative methodology for the study of social systems is described. This method represents the integration of two systemic models of interaction which are both based on Bateson's epistemology. The application of this method to the study of organizational communication and burnout illustrates one way to shift the study of social change (via the study of burnout) from an individually oriented focus to a focus on interactive patterns.

The Complexity of Interactive Change:
A Study of Organizational Burnout

To us, the most satisfying intellectual endeavors explore theoretical and methodological ideas which appear to have real life, practical consequences. In this essay, we attempt to do just that. This is the first report of an extensive cross-cultural project exploring the pragmatic topic of organizational communication patterns.

This research was designed to examine the phenomenon of burnout in social service agencies. We approach the topic of burnout differently from current research in this area (see, Maslach, 1976; 1978a; 1981) by seeing it as a symptom of organizational communication patterns rather than a characteristic inherent to or developed within a particular individual. This different orientation emphasizes intervention (through research interviews) into organizational systems which are most often seen as contributing to feelings of burnout. Thus, we hope to move away from simple description of the behaviors or environments causing feelings of burnout. In this sense, we attempt to shift the study of social change (via the study of burnout) from an individually oriented focus to a focus on interactive patterns (i.e., what people do together).

While we find this topic interesting and important, our theoretical and methodological goals provide us with more impetus for this research than the specific study of burnout. In the sections which follow, we will first outline our theoretical interests. This will be followed by an illustration of how the epistemological orientation of our theory has

led us to develop the specific methodology used to study burnout. We will conclude with case illustrations of this methodology and some of the theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic implications drawn from these cases as they concern the specific conceptualization of burnout.

Theoretical Orientation

The work of Gregory Bateson (1972; 1979) emphasizes the circular, systemic nature of interaction. If we were to select ideas central to all of Bateson's thinking, the list would include the notions of pattern, relationship, distinction/difference, and context. Clearly, Bateson introduces may ideas in his voluminous works. However, it seems that any other concept he discusses (such as meaning) is made in reference to the ideas listed above (e.g., meaning must be discussed in relation to the idea of context -- "without context, there is no meaning" -- and also must be discussed in terms of relationship -- we can only "know" by drawing a distinction and a distinction is a relationship).

There are several theoretical models which claim a circular, systems approach. It is beyond the scope of this essay to articulate the distinctions among these various models (see, MacKinnon, 1983). We adopt an integration of two theoretical models which we believe are most consistent with Bateson's circular epistemology. One model, the Milan systemic model (Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata, 1978), has been developed within a clinical setting (i.e., family therapy). The second model, the coordinated management of meaning theory (Pearce and Cronen, 1980), has been developed within a social scientific, research

tradition. We borrow our method from the Milan model and integrate some central concepts and analytical procedures from Pearce and Cronen's theory. This integration provides us with a variety of useful tools for analyzing social interaction within Bateson's epistemological frame.

Bateson's Systemic Epistemology

There are several excellent accounts of Bateson's epistemology (Dell, 1985; Keeney, 1983). We will only summarize Bateson's central position.

Bateson uses the term epistemology to refer to the way we know or understand. Of course, our knowledge or understanding comes from our experiences in the world and so, determines or influences how we think, act and organize our existence. This is a reflexive process; the way we know directs our actions (experience) which directs what we know, etc.

What makes Bateson's epistemology, and others who share a common perspective (see, Maturana, 1978; Maturana and Varela, 1987), distinct from a traditional positivistic position is the acceptance of the reflexive nature of knowing. This position entails different ways of conceptualizing constructs that have been central to the study of human behavior. Included are the notions of objectivity/subjectivity, lineal causality/circular causality, homeostasis/evolution, and mind as internal/mind as social. As Krippendorf (1984) points out, the cybernetic (or systemic) epistemology is distinguished from the traditional, positivistic orientation to science by the latter's emphasis on ontology as pre-existing, objective reality. Thus, from a

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traditional position, a researcher or theorist attempts to develop and apply procedures for "discovering" the nature of the social order.

From a systemic epistemology, on the other hand, one's ontology and epistemology are viewed in reflexive relation to one another. What one believes exists (ontology) is a result of what one knows and how one comes to know (epistemology) which, in turn, shapes what one believes to be, and so on. To take either a purely ontological or purely epistemological position is incomplete. And, although Bateson only spoke of epistemology, his epistemological position necessarily included the reflexive process of ontology and epistemology (Dell, 1985).

Bateson, however, can be read as placing ontology in a subordinate position to epistemology (Dell, 1985). His choice to emphasize epistemology over ontology is probably due to his attempt to draw a distinction from traditional science where ontology was the emphasis. Bateson most explicitly argues for the acceptance of subjectivity, circular causality, and evolution. However, an understanding of Bateson's work involves recognizing that subjectivity can not be discussed devoid of objectivity. Circular causality can only be conceptualized in relation to lineal causality and the issue of evolutionary change can only be seen in light of the idea of homeostasis or stability. The centrality of Bateson's idea that knowing is the process of drawing distinctions (1972, p.163) entails an active acknowledgement of the particular distinctions individuals draw. In addition, this position implies that the distinctions one draws are

evaluated by a criterion of selection (Maturana, 1978) as opposed to a criterion of truth. Selection implies that an individual (or system) is organized such that particular choices seem more "logical" than others. It is not a question of right or wrong choices. As Dell puts it,

> Selecting is akin to pushing the Sprite button on a Coke machine. Pushing the button selects the response of the machine (it gives you a Sprite), but it does not determine that the machine gives Sprite when the button is pushed (Dell, 1985,p.8).

It is possible to receive a Coke when the Sprite button is pushed or to receive no soda at all. Thus, we can see how the concept of selection allows us to talk of the choices made by a system as responsibilities of that system, not as response to external causal forces.

In contrast,traditional, positivistic models of science assume that a theory pictures the world as causally connected. If a theoretical proposition does not reflect the real world, it is meaningless. Thus, the criterion for evaluation of any theory is clear correspondence through observation (i.e., operationalized phenomena).

A systemic epistemology takes selection as the criterion for evaluating theoretical propositions. Meaningful propositions are selected by a researcher because they render the social structure or specific social actions interpretable. It is important to remember, however, that theoretical statements could be selected that are not valuable. To be valuable, a theory should speak to the creation and

transformation of contextual patterns. Thus, selection, as a criterion for science, does not imply a relativistic position but rather emphasizes the responsibility of the observer/researcher and acknowledges his/her intervention.

Given this position, we can say that a theory of social action should be able to account for the ways in which people make sense out of their interactions. This might very well involve recognizing an individual's logic or "map" for making sense of the world as characterized by ideas of objectivity, lineal causality and homeostasis. For example, a person might believe that there is only one correct way to behave in close, personal relationships (i.e., objectivity); that what others do in these close relationships cause one's own behaviors (i.e., lineal causality); and that there is a sense of stability and endurance to what we have come to call successful, close relationships (i.e., homeostasis).

A theory which allows for this way of making sense of interaction and allows for other "personal models" or "personal epistemologies" (e.g., such as accounts that are framed by the individual as more circular and subjective) serves as a good exemplar of Bateson's systemic epistemology. In sum, this is a position which embraces and celebrates a plurality of positions, a criterion of selection and the reflexivity of both theorizing and acting in the world.

The Milan Systemic Model

The Milan model (Selvini, et al., 1978), developed in Italy,

translates Bateson's systemic epistemology into a model and method for conducting family therapy. Detailed descriptions of the Milan model have been provided by Tomm (1984a, 1984b), Campbell and Draper (1985), and Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman, and Penn, (1987).

In general, accepting the recursivity between meaning and action and focusing on patterns which connect ideas, behaviors, events, and people is what distinguishes the Milan model from other theories of social interaction where focus is placed on the individual and on an analytical logic of lineal causality. Consistent with the pluralistic nature of the systemic epistemology, the Milan associates have developed what they call "guiding principles" for a clinician using their model. This linguistic label is markedly different from the strict "technique-orientation" of some more traditional clinical models.

The guiding principles suggested by the Milan team are hypothesizing, circularity, and neutrality. Each of these principles guide the analysis of and intervention into a social system.

Hypothesizing. Hypotheses focus on the function of behaviors, ideas, and interactions rather than treat information as fact or truth. It is important, for our purposes, to note that hypotheses are not devised independently of the specific interaction they are constructed to explain. Hypotheses typically focus on behavioral sequences and any known interpretations and/or evaluations of these sequences made by those who are part of the system as well as involved "outsiders."

The practice of hypothesizing suggests that a variety of competing

explanations for a "symptom" may be useful. They serve as frames through which the therapist can direct questions and connect data to produce information.

The Milan team suggests developing and using several alternative hypotheses simultaneously. In this way, a clinician can remain systemic in his/her thinking about the system rather than adopt and thereby reify only one way to punctuate the system ("a difference is a relationship"). It is only possible to construct alternative punctuations of a system (i.e., alternative hypotheses) if a view of "pragmatic truth" (as opposed to classical truth) is adopted. If a clinician believes his/her hypothesis is "true" in the classical sense, it is very difficulty, if not impossible, to construct alternatives (i.e., hypotheses which provoke useful interventions/connections).

Circularity. Circularity, as a guiding principle, is based on Bateson's belief that a difference is a relationship. At the methodological level, the Milan team has developed this idea into a way of formulating and asking questions. The main idea of circular questioning or circular interviewing is to ask questions that address a difference or define a relationship as opposed to questions of facts and feelings. Circular questioning allows the therapist to gather information about the various ways in which people punctuate (i.e., make sense out of and sequence) the behaviors and ideas of each other. By asking circular questions in a group (e.g., family) context, involved members come to see how their own actions are interpreted by others. The

technique of circular questioning often illuminates a "difference that makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972, p. 271-272).

It is the divergences of interpretations that become interesting information as opposed to a traditional researcher's or clinician's interest in discovering one logical explanation. In this way, a therapist and the family have available a new set of connections/relationships. The data gathered through this questioning method is transformed into information about connections between people, ideas, relationships and time and thus, into additional hypotheses about patterns. The beauty of this is that it reminds clinicians that all punctuations are equally logical within the frames that different people use. Thus, the Milan clinician is more likely to remember that his/her own punctuation or interpretation of a situation is simply one more -- not the "right" one. It is the one selected.

Neutrality. Neutrality is described as "the ability to escape alliances with family members, to avoid moral judgments, to resist all linear traps and entanglements" (Hoffman, 1981, p. 303.). To remain in a neutral position vis a vis the system does not imply inactivity. Instead, a neutral position is a clinician's attempt to recognize the function of all behaviors in the system, including his/her own behaviors. Cecchin defines systemic neutrality as constructing a frame of curiosity (in press). Rather than make decisions about the truth or falsity, the "goodness" or "badness" of a behavior, a position of curiosity helps a clinician generate questions which might, in turn, generate new ways of

looking at behaviors, events or people. It should be noted, however, that neutrality is an ideal. Once a therapist acts, s/he loses any neutral stance because all behavior, in interaction, contributes to the continual negotiation of power relationships (Foucault, 1980).

In sum, the Milan model focuses on connections in a family's or individual's belief system. In practice, this focus is attended to by employing a circular questioning style to collect data about beliefs concerning relationships between people, events, behaviors and meanings. These questions also add a temporal dimension by accessing individual's perceptions of sequences of behaviors and potential future states (e.g., "Was John more or less depressed when mother started working?" or "If mother were to stop working, would John be less depressed?"). By focusing on their relational and temporal connections, the Milan team does not limit themselves solely to observation of behavioral redundancies.

The guiding principles of hypothesizing, circularity, and neutrality are rooted in the idea that it is helpful to understand the different reasons/causes given by people involved in the system (including the clinician's own explanations) so that connections or relations may be drawn among these explanations. Simply put, a systemic therapist is not trying to find one reason why the system is as it is. S/he tries to connect all of the "personal epistemologies" in a novel way which might facilitate the system in finding its own solution.

The notion of pragmatic truth (developed out of the criterion of

selection) provides a context within which the questions asked become interventive strategies implying new punctuations and labels through exposing equally plausible yet competing realities. The interventions provide new connections. The Batesonian notions of no stable system, no knowing or objective position from which to stand, and circular causality (which simultaneously allows for the lineal ways in which individuals may punctuate their experiences) are the conceptual tools which distinguish the Milan model from other systems-based models of social interaction.

The Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory

As with the Milan model, complete and lengthy description of Pearce and Cronen's theory can be found elsewhere (Pearce and Cronen, 1980; Cronen, Johnson and Lannamann, 1982). We will only attempt to provide the basic assumptions and relevant features of this model.

Pearce and Cronen have developed a theory of communication (or social interaction) which emphasizes the systemic epistemology proposed by Bateson. In developing their theory, they have constructed concepts and methodological procedures for some of Bateson's most important ideas. Specifically, Bateson's notion of a "pattern which connects" (Bateson, 1979, p. 8) is described in the coordinated management of meaning theory (hereafter, CMM theory) as logic.

Logic. Pearce and Cronen do not use the term logic in the same sense as we refer to classical logic but rather in the sense of a map. A logic is a map people use in making sense out of their worlds but it is not necessarily a true map, nor is it necessarily in correspondence with

some "true social order."

Intrapersonal logic. Pearce and Cronen describe individuals as utilizing intrapersonal logics which are basically maps for interpreting the context and actions of self and other(s) and also schemata for guiding sequential order. In other words, any individual, in a particular situation, will use a conglomeration of past experiences as made real or as interpreted in the present (i.e., not necessarily in a causal manner) and expectations about future states, to understand or make sense out of the array of complex activity (situation, relationship, self, action, etc.). Individuals also use these schemata to guide their choice of action(s). Thus, given that a person might interpret a situation as hostile and a particular behavior as a threat, s/he might feel it is "logical" and necessary to threaten in response. There is a personal sense of logical entailment such that if X occurs, Y should, could or has to follow. For some, many alternatives may be seen as possible. Also, meaning and action may be perceived in less lineal terms.

Interpersonal logic. Additionally, Pearce and Cronen discuss the idea of an interpersonal logic which is nothing more than the unique way in which two or more individuals' intrapersonal logics form to combine a logic of the interactive system. This logic is, necessarily, different from either intrapersonal logic and more complex than the simple sum of two or more intrapersonal logics. Interpersonal logic, as a theoretical construct, reminds us that each interactive system makes sense within the

boundaries where it is constructed. Thus, in order to understand an interaction, we must gather some sense of how individuals "logically" view the entailment of meaning and action and construct a model of how these intrapersonal logics combine to form the interpersonal system experienced and observed.

This idea of logic draws our attention to the unique ways in which individuals make distinctions and thereby construct patterns. It also strongly emphasizes the inadequacy of assuming a limited array of "logical" interactive patterns that produce satisfying, competent relationships.

Hierarchy of meaning. The second major idea introduced by Pearce and Cronen is the notion of an extended hierarchy. Drawing on Bateson's (1972) report and command levels of meaning, Pearce and Cronen propose a more detailed hierarchy of meaning. They suggest that there are a variety of levels that people use to make sense out of situations. Social meanings are hierarchically organized such that one level is the context for the interpretation of others. The levels are unlimited in number and are not necessarily stable. In fact, they are in reflexive relation to each other such that a meaning at one level is simultaneously dependent on and constitutive of the next higher level. However, it should be noted, that in the logic of any given individual, in a particular situation or relationship, the levels may appear to be rigid and fixed. Again, we see Bateson's distinction between what is pragmatically true for an individual and what is theoretically and

methodologically selected to examine and intervene in social systems.

Pearce and Cronen propose several hierarchical levels that people, in general, select to make sense of interaction. Essentially, these levels are simply an extension of Bateson's relational (command) level of meaning. The archetypal hierarchy in CMM theory includes: action, speech acts, episodes, relationships, life scripts and cultural myths. When examining any particular phenomenon, for example, family interaction, a level such as "family myth" might be a useful addition.

The point is that these levels do not exist. They are merely devices selected by an observer to examine social interaction. For example, we may observe that two people involved in an intimate relationship define the relationship in very different ways. This definition, in turn, influences how each defines certain typical episodes and consequently defines the meaning of specific behaviors (speech acts). These distinctions made by an observer can be informative (a "difference that may make a difference"), whether that observer is the researcher, the actor, or both.

It is additionally informative to distinguish the specific ordering of each individual's hierarchy. One partner may see his/her sense of self (life script) as the criterion for making all other levels meaningful (i.e., given a particular script for my life, I see x, y, and z types of relationships as appropriate and within these relationships, a, b, and c episodes are necessary while d, e, and f episodes are inappropriate and damaging to the relationship and my life script). Yet,

the other partner might see particular episodes as the frame through which self, relationships and actions make sense. These differences construct a certain relationship which is selected by the observer (who may be the actor) for the purpose of understanding interactive patterns -- particularly convoluted patterns -- in a way which allows the system to be its "own best explanation" thereby avoiding the criteria of truth and objectivity.

Research Method

By integrating the Milan model and Pearce and Cronen's communication theory, we have developed a research methodology which adopts the assumptions of a systemic epistemology. This means that we should be able to accept data gathered from and analyzed within a variety of techniques. All forms are viewed as providing information. It is the differences that emerge, from what many would see as competing orientations to social scientific research, that become the interesting data. In difference there is a relationship, according to Bateson. And so, with this in mind, we orient our own research by asking the general question: What is the difference that makes a difference here?

Instead of looking for similarities, we look for differences because this appears to be a way of bringing forth the complexity of human interaction. When researchers look for similarities among people, types of interaction, etc. they are easily "discovered." Yet, similarity is found in the context of difference; just as difference is found in the context of similarity. Because traditional research has amplified the

search for similarity and simplicity (i.e., central tendencies), we have taken on the project of examining data for differences and complexity. Neither approach is right; they are, simply, complementary. We recognize that we have necessarily simplified the complexity on which we have focused. And, at another logical level, we have drawn similarities among the differences we are interested in.

With these goals in mind, we generated a basic research scheme. Central ideas from both CMM theory and the Milan model were used in developing this scheme. In the data collection stage, the following techniques were used: (1) systemic or group interviews (a method borrowed from the Milan model); (2) circular questions (Milan model) concerning meaning at various hierarchical levels (CMM theory); and (3) individual questionnaires focusing on the intrapersonal logic of problem-related team episodes (CMM theory).

The data analysis stage included: (1) hypothesizing (Milan model) about intrapersonal logics (CMM theory); (2) hypothesizing (Milan model) about interpersonal logics (CMM theory); and (3) intersystemic hypothesizing (i.e., looking for similarities among the differences). In conducting research on any topic, this basic format can be used. The following section outlines our specific study of organizational burnout. With this description we hope to illustrate how the general ideas presented above translate into a focused research project.

The Study of Organizational Burnout

Burnout has recently become a significant issue in the social

sciences because of the fundamental effects this condition has on productivity and quality of performance in the work place. By defining burnout as a symptom of communication patterns, emphasis shifts from the individual to the connections of individuals' behaviors in the production of interactive patterns resulting in burnout.

However, this is a new shift. Maslach (1976, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1981, and 1982), who has been prolific and instrumental in defining, operationalizing, and studying burnout in a variety of contexts, represents a more individually-oriented model of this phenomenon. For example, she defines burnout as, ". . . a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do °people work'" (Maslach and Jackson, 1981, p.1). According to Maslach and Jackson, burnout is an individual problem of intense and prolonged involvement in social service organizations.

However, recent research on psychotherapeutic interventions in social service organizations (Cacciari, De Paolis, Fruggeri, Minguzzi, and Zani, 1986) suggests a connection between expressed dissatisfaction in the worker and his/her interactions or relationships within the organization (e.g., with supervisors, colleagues, administrators and clients). Each of these relationships has significance to the study of burnout in that they each comprise different levels used by individuals in constructing social meaning — that is, in interpreting social action. This orientation differs significantly form Maslach's because it highlights interactive patterns both within the organization and with

clients rather than focusing on individual sources of burnout.

We have attempted to extend the systemic analysis of Cacciari et al. We treat burnout as a symptom of certain communication patterns within the macrosystem of social service organizations. This directs our attention to the various types of (often contradictory) interaction necessary for a social worker to succeed in his/her work. Contradictions between various work related interactions contribute to feelings of frustration and emotional exhaustion.

Our attention is directed to communication patterns typified by double binds and paradox where workers are simultaneously presented with two mutually contradictory sets of demands. We expect that there are different strategies developed by both individuals and working teams in response to contradictory messages. These differing strategies will be related in some way to the degree of rigidity or flexibility of both intrapersonal and interpersonal logics for each team. And, in addition, self assessments of burnout (using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, 1981) will be related to an individual's logic and the logic of the system. However, we do not make an evaluative assessment that flexibility in a logic is better than rigidity or vice versa. Instead, we assess the function of both rigidity and flexibility within each team in an attempt to recognize and understand the unique logics constructed for each system. This orientation changes the study of burnout from what has traditionally been evaluative and/or descriptive research (i.e., research which assumes that being burned out negatively influences work ability

and is therefore, bad) to systemic research. The aim of systemic research is not to make general evaluative assessments but to understand, as in this study, how feeling burned out helps a system or team organize themselves and helps an individual "fit" within the interactive logic.

Sample

Consistent with the social rather than purely individual approach of the Milan model and CMM theory, the unit of observation in this study is the social service providers' communication patterns within the context of their organizations. We interviewed working teams which we defined as three or more people in a person-oriented service, who are defined as a team by their common function within the organization or by their institutional role (e.g. Emergency Treatment Team, Adult Day Treatment Team, Crisis Intervention Team, etc.).

In addition, we added a cross-cultural dimension to this research by interviewing teams from both Northern Italy and the Northeastern United States. We were interested in looking at cultural differences in how organizations construct a logic. And, of course, we were interested in examining if these logics differed with respect to how workers manage burnout. Our concern was additionally placed on the potential for culture-specific definitions of what it takes to be a "good worker" (and consequently, what is the function or place of burnout).

Subjects

Sixteen teams participated in the research. They were solicited by letter from target catchment areas in both Northern Italy and

Northeastern U.S. Eight teams from the U.S. and eight Italian teams volunteered their time in response to the letter of request. Administrative permission was given to all teams for their time and cooperation in this research.

Procedures

The research procedure lasted approximately three hours. Each team was interviewed separately. The Italian teams were interviewed by the second author and the American teams were interviewed by the first author.

Prior to conducting the systemic interview, each team member was asked to complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The rationale for including Maslach's inventory is based on two factors. First, we wanted to accept the already well-documented use of Maslach's instrument. It did not seem logical to us to exclude the already valid, reliable and useful approach that Maslach adopts simply because our approach is not focused on an individual orientation. We felt that inclusion of this instrument would actually help us by providing yet another way to punctuate both intrapersonal and interpersonal logics. Accepting the information produced through the analysis of the MBI rather than rejecting it as an example of a traditional, individualistic analysis, also provided us with our second rationale. We used the MBI as a pretest/posttest measure of burnout indicating whether or not the research interview had perhaps served as an intervention into the intrapersonal system. Again, this rationale is consistent with our

epistemology wherein we accept the idea of research as intervention rather than the idea of research as "discovery" of phenomena (see McNamee and Tomm, 1986; McNamee, in press).

After each team member had completed the MBI (approximately 15 minutes), the systemic interview was conducted. A systemic interview, consisting of circular questions, helps members of the system recognize how communication patterns, not internal states, construct and contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction. Thus, social service providers, asked circular questions as a group, begin to redefine their own experiences within the organization as a function of the new connections or interpretations of people, behaviors, etc. that are made throughout the interview.

The content of the interview questions was customized to focus on the various relationships and hierarchical levels within the social service organization. The specific hierarchical levels included administrators, supervisor, colleagues (not on the Team), clients, funding source, other area agencies, and the Team itself. We assumed that for most social service agencies, this hierarchy reflected the range of individuals that could potentially play significant roles in the team's functioning. However, we equally accepted as useful information statements from teams indicating no relationship with, for example, other area agencies.

Using Pearce and Cronen's hierarchy of meaning, we designed circular questions focusing on the Team's view of the cultural myth of the

organization, the life script of the team, the teams's relevant relationships, stressful episodes, and specific actions as they relate to the organizational levels mentioned above. For example, exploring the idea of the cultural myth, we asked, "What does this agency do?". After the team had given a group response, we proceeded to ask the team what they believed the administration would say the agency does. We then would move on to ask what the team thought their supervisor, the clients, their colleagues, etc. would say the agency does. In this way, we were able to develop information based on difference. That is, team members began to explicitly recognize the similarities and differences between the team and other organizational levels as well as among each team members' beliefs about the cultural myth, the life script of the team their relationships with others, etc.

Because this was a study of burnout, we focused on the three most stressful episodes described by each team. First, each team was asked to agree on a rank ordering of their work interactions (from most to least stressful), as a team, with people at each of the organizational levels mentioned above. For example, one team may have ranked their interactions with the administrator as most stressful and their interactions with their clients as least stressful. From this list, the three most stressful episodes became the focus of further circular questions exploring (1) shared knowledge of the team's difficulty with others in the stressful episodes and (2) the team's idea of who would side with whom concerning these problem episodes.

These three episodes then became the central concern of the last stage of the research interview. After the team had briefly described how each episode was carried out and what they perceived (collectively) to produce the stress in each of the episodes, each individual team member was given an opportunity to provide their own perceptions about these episodes. At this level, we were able to gather additional information about the intrapersonal logics of each team member as well as document the specific actions of individuals in these stressful episodes.

It should be noted that throughout this interview, team members were asked to construct a "team response." Thus, any differences of opinion which arose during the interview had to be negotiated. This procedure, in itself, served as an intervention in that for many teams and many team members, this was the first "formal" forum they had experienced for openly discussing (or even realizing) these differences. In addition, demanding a team response made the last portion of the interview all the more important to individual participants. By ending the interview with individual, paper and pencil questionnaires, each team member was given an opportunity to reiterate his/her disagreements and individual views on the specific episodes as well as comment on his/her own behavior. This data, then, became a source of intrapersonal logics or maps.

Data Analysis

Because so much information was generated from this research protocol, we will only report here on our preliminary analyses. We see these analyses as only one way to punctuate these data. Future reports

will provide complementary analyses. Essentially, we began by looking at data generated by the MBI and from the individual questionnaires for each of the stressful episodes. This essay, therefore, is limited to these analyses.

For both of these data sources, we first used Pearce's and Cronen's idea of an intrapersonal logic to look at how individual team members construe their place and their behaviors in the context of their job. After hypothesizing about these intrapersonal logics, we focused on the interaction of team members who use different logics, in the construction of an interactive system (or an interpersonal logic). Our methods for doing so are described below.

Analysis of the MBI. A complete description of analytical procedures and interpretation of results of the MBI can be found elsewhere (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Briefly, the MBI consists of ". . . three subscales that assess different aspects of experienced burnout" (p.1). These subscales are: (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization, and (3) lack of personal accomplishment. "Each subscale has two dimensions: frequency (how often people have these feelings) and intensity (the strength of these feelings)" (p.1).

In addition, each subscale is measured on a continuum from low to moderate to high. Thus, subjects are interpreted as being more or less burned out. It is not a dichotomous phenomenon. Maslach and Jackson (1981) lay out their criteria for interpreting scores as falling within the high, medium or low range for each subscale. Using their criteria,

we were able to assess the degree of burnout experienced by each team member. We accepted a portrayal of who was more (or less) burned out on each team.

This analysis became our external criterion for individual burnout. To be consistent with our systemic assumptions, we had to construct a relational criterion of assessing burnout. For this reason, we borrowed the Milan Team's idea of hypothesizing and Pearce's and Cronen's idea of a logic in our construction of an analytical technique. We began by recognizing who was more or less burned out using Maslach's criteria. We asked the general question, "What is the difference that makes a difference on this team?" We next asked ourselves, how our selection of the phenomenon of burnout helped us to see each individual's selected behavior as "sensible" to his/her interactive system. From this position we could see how a particular member's report of specific levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment "fit" with others. This technique allowed us to redefine burnout within a relational context.

It should be noted that we substitute here the idea of "systemic validity" for what has been traditionally called validity. This is because validity, as a construct, assumes that there is a true or correct manner for measuring or collecting data and for interpreting data. Within systemic epistemology, we also hope to achieve a kind of validity to avoid the notion of relativity or "anything goes." However, we do not accept the idea that the MBI truly measures burnout. All we can accept

is the idea that the MBI offers us one way to examine burnout. In our own interpretation of the data, we look to other experts within the systemic model to help us generate hypotheses which provide "news of a difference" (Bateson, 1972). Thus, news of difference becomes our criterion of validity.

With this conceptualization, we asked systemic experts to examine the MBI scores of each team member (one team at a time) and try to develop a working hypothesis about the logic of that team, the place of each individual within that logic and most specifically, the selections or choices actors construct by being more or less burned out in the system. In this way, the interpretations of scores could not be influenced by specific knowledge the interviewer had of each team and each member. For example, the MBI data for one entire team indicated that one member was particularly burned out. Specifically, this member reported low levels of personal accomplishment. However, when seen in relation to the other members of his team, we hypothesized that it would probably be dysfunctional for him to experience high personal accomplishment because then there would be conflict on the team. In this way, he was protecting the team and helping them stay together as a working team by not trying to be too much of an individual (through high personal accomplishment). Being burned out is a way of describing himself which is consistent with a way of acting on this team.

Of course, we could not construct this hypothesis if we did not simultaneously examine the scores of his other team members. In so

doing, we noticed that others on this team experienced very high levels of personal accomplishment (in relation to his low level) and that it might be likely to expect that if all members tried to become personally accomplished through their team work, that there would perhaps be no sense of a team. In other words, we thought that one punctuation, for this particular team, might suggest that being personally accomplished was equated with autonomy and, that too much autonomy on this team would produce an image of fragmentation. The burned out member was therefore helping to give the team a sense of "teamness" and the remainder of the team, in turn, helped him belong to the team as a "burned out" member. It is interesting to note here how Bateson's idea of difference (i.e., the difference between this one team member and the others on this one scale) creates a relationship (i.e., an hypothesis about how this helps all members construct a sense of team).

A couple of points are worth making. First, we do not mean to imply that any person who experiences high personal accomplishment is therefore autonomous. What we are actually suggesting is that for this team, this interpretation seemed logical. Second, as another form of "systemic validity," the hypotheses constructed were discussed at a later point with the interviewer of the team who then either supported or altered the working hypothesis. In the particular case mentioned above, the interviewer in fact agreed that this team seemed to operate under the threat of too much autonomy, thereby never really feeling absolutely certain that they really were a team.

Analysis of individual episode questionnaires. Another way to move our analysis of burnout to the relational level is through assessment of the individual questionnaires completed by each team member concerning the three most stressful episodes. Here, again, we asked ourselves, "What is the difference that makes a difference?" We began by examining each person's responses to the items on the questionnaire. Again, using systemic experts who were not familiar with the teams, we read the responses to questions, episode by episode. After hearing the responses given by an individual, the experts generated an hypothesis about the intrapersonal logic being used by that person in each episode.

Pearce's and Cronen's idea of hierarchy was used as the frame for formulating these hypotheses. In essence, we tried to take the information provided by the team member and construct it into an hypothesis concerning how that individual construed meaning hierarchically. The task was to hypothesize about (1) whether or not this person's logic was reflexive or fixed, (2) whether it included all levels of the hierarchy we were concerned with (e.g., cultural myth of the organization, relationship, life script, episode, action), and (3) in what hierarchical order (regardless of reflexivity) the individual seemed to construe these interactions.

For example, the same individual we mentioned above as being burned out was hypothesized as using a logic which says, "relationships with others are most influential in my interpretation of episodes and actions." In response to the individual questionnaires, this person

produced an image of himself as the kind of person who literally interprets relationships (e.g., "Sara is in charge of this team.") and then uses this interpretation to make sense out of episodes and actions (e.g., "Sara must decide what are and are not appropriate kinds of interactions and ways of acting for us as a team").

Thus, his logic is what appears to be a rigid logic in that he feels powerless to change or have a powerful effect on this team. In order for anything to change in his logic, the relationship would have to change first (because it is the highest and therefore most influential level). But he also seems to believe that only other members of the team (who he perceives are more powerful) can change the relationship (which is, of course, consistent with his idea that the relationship is fixed and stable). Consequently, he reports feeling burned out and very stressed by the episodes described during the team interview. However, he does recognize that other team members might be able (due to their life scripts) to help Sara redefine team relationships which, in turn, could provide a new, stable, fixed relational context for making sense out of episodes and actions. So, this individual does seem to recognize that change is possible. He simply perceives himself as not capable of initiating change.

Hypotheses such as these were constructed for each team member. Putting them together gives us a sense of the interpersonal logic operating for a given team. Consequently, we are again freed from defining burnout categorically and can recognize burnout in the context

of each specific team and its own logic.

Intersystemic analysis. Here we focused on comparing teams. Again we used the question: "What is the difference that makes a difference?" We gathered together (1) the traditional MBI analysis, (2) the MBI hypotheses, and (3) the hypotheses concerning individuals' logics of hierarchical meaning. By examining each team and asking what consistent differences emerged, we were essentially asking Bateson's question, "What is that pattern that connects?"

What made sense to us, in this stage of the analysis was recognition of a patterning of rigidity versus flexibility. That is, each team seemed to be characterized by individuals whose logics appeared to be relatively rigid or flexible. We noticed that in using this criterion, the "different" person(s) on each team was seen as using a rigid logic (in comparison to others on the team). This struck us as an interesting observation. We did not see, as we had hoped to, that the "different" person(s) was necessarily the burned out person. Additionally, we do not view rigidity in an evaluative manner. Each team, from a systemic viewpoint, may need a rigid person, just as each team may need a burned out person. Thus, rigidity does not imply wrong action or lack of action. It is simply a way of describing a logic.

The example discussed above illustrates a burned out member as using a rigid logic. In analyzing other teams we saw individuals who were not at all burned out but who also seemed to be using a rigid logic. One person described on his individual questionnaires an intrapersonal logic

which characterized change as only occurring if "the world" changes. Society, or more specifically, the team's and his own relation with society became responsible — became the orienting context — for change. In terms of the implication of studying burnout, we must consider whether or not we would want to tell human service professionals that they should adopt a logic similar to this man's. After all, he's not burned out. Again we are not interested in making evaluative statements. In some ways, the logic used by this person might be dysfunctional (too idealistic). In other ways, it might be useful in that it introduces a different perspective.

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, this essay is our first attempt to lay out the epistemological, theoretical and methodological foundation for the study of burnout in an organizational context. Our future analyses will focus on different aspects of this same set of data. We have tried only to illustrate (1) that research can, in fact, be conducted from within an alternative epistemology —and this absolutely includes the ability to accept and utilize data produced by what might be otherwise viewed as lineal, causal models; (2) that the integration of the Milan systemic model and Pearce and Cronen's theory offer some generative concepts and techniques for both gathering and analyzing data; (3) that there are a plurality of ways to generate and analyze data and what we have produced in this essay is only one punctuation which is guided by our belief that it is a productive one marked by the "difference" it introduces; and (4)

that the specific phenomenon of burnout might be reconceputualized as a selected alternative rather than as an individual problem.

We have tried to capture and preserve the complexity of human interaction. Burnout, for example, is not good or bad, needed or not needed. It is a complex, relational issue. We have developed a systemic method to try to capture some of that complexity. However, we recognize that any research is, by definition, an attempt to simplify the phenomenon. Therefore, instead of looking for similarities, we look for differences because this appears to be a way to bring forth more complexity. We have obviously found similarity as well (e.g., "all different people appear to have rigid logics"). We have found similarity in the complementary context of difference. It is precisely this kind of relational connection, the continual formation of patterns, that unite traditional research and research from a systemic epistemology. However, the criteria of selection is what constructs the "difference that makes a difference."

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